

Is it possible to satiate real consumption desires in virtual worlds?

Second Life case study

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of consumption desires has been studied in consumer behaviour to provide a more realistic comprehension of the daily lives of consumers and their relationship to consumption (Belk and al., 2003; Boujbel, 2010). In most industrialized countries, people's basic needs are largely satisfied and they are constantly engaged in a quest to satisfy their consumption desires in order to reach satisfaction and happiness (Boven and Gilovich, 2003). Currently, new alternatives and opportunities are available to help them satisfy more eccentric consumption desires and fantasies. Indeed, the emergence of virtual worlds offers alternatives to virtually consume an unlimited set of objects that seem inaccessible in real life (Lin 2007). Recent studies about virtual worlds reveal that the concept of desire is inherent to the existence of these worlds (Landay, 2008). Yet some questions remain unanswered: How can these virtual worlds help consumers satisfy their consumption desires? Are they really a satisfactory substitute for the fulfillment of these desires?

This study is an exploratory research which constitutes the first step of a project to investigate to what extent virtual worlds may offer satisfaction to real world consumption desires. The first section of the paper presents the theoretical background in the areas of consumption desires and virtual worlds. The second section presents the methodological approach selected to answer the research issues. Finally, the last section presents the preliminary results and the main contributions of the research.

BACKGROUND

Consumption desires are an important aspect of human life because they represent what people want to obtain, as well as their aspirations (Diener and Seligman 2002). They are even considered as a bridge between the actual and the ideal self (Higgins 1987, Wilk 1997). The desire is induced by the thoughts of, or the encounter with a fit object not possessed, when such possession seems to be called for (Frijda 1986). Desire is defined as “a powerful cyclic emotion that is both discomforting and pleasurable” (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003, p. 326), and as such, it is an emotionally ambivalent experience (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003, Ramanathan and Williams 2007).

Some consumers cannot prevent themselves from constantly desiring consumption objects (Boujbel 2007). In general, these consumers want to live a luxurious life of abundance and constantly looking for objects that will bring them satisfaction and happiness (Lipovetsky 2006). However, because of limited resources or inappropriate circumstances, all consumers may be faced with their inability to satisfy all their consumption desires (Craib 1994), and this situation causes most of the time feelings of frustration.

With the proliferation of virtual worlds, new consumption spaces emerged. Navigating for hours and hours these online persistent worlds, residents create parallel worlds to their real world. In doing so, they have freedom to choose one or more individual and collective identities (avatars), involving consumption choices (El Kamel, 2009). Some consumers as well as companies adopted these spaces where almost everything could be attainable and feasible. These universes also become spaces of virtual consumption, where everything could be bought and sold (Castronova 2005). Combining technical, psychological and social aspects, virtual worlds have been studied principally in the fields of information, communication, social psychology and sociology.

In consumer behavior, several studies begin to elucidate the implications of virtual worlds in terms of consumption. These researches focused on identity through avatars (Parmentier and Rolland, 2009; Messinger and al., 2008; Vidcan and Ulusoy, 2008; Becerra and Stutts, 2008; Boostrom, 2008; Bryant and Akerman, 2009; Kim and Sundar, 2009; Belisle and Bodur, 2010), products and brands as well as possession of virtual objects (Haenlein and Kaplan, 2009; Landay, 2008; Martin, 2008; Park and al., 2008) and the consumption implications of social interactions in virtual worlds (Hinsch and Bloch, 2009; Brown and Tracy, 2009; Crete and al, 2009).

This research is the first exploratory step of a research project designed: (1) to study how consumers with insatiate desires in real life moves toward virtual worlds to satisfy them, (2) to see whether the conceptualization of the virtual influences the way consumption desires are apprehended in the virtual and the real worlds (3) to elaborate a typology of consumption desires that may be satisfied through virtual worlds (4) and finally to verify the consumer's eternal dissatisfaction. Since it's a research in progress, in this paper we try to address the first three objectives of the project.

METHOD

To achieve the research main objective, the choice was given to the case study of the currently most popular virtual world *Second Life* with over than 400 million hours of connection and more than 365 million U.S. dollars of transactions for 2008. A qualitative study is being conducted to understand the essence of the consumption experience lived by Second Life residents as a means to satisfy various real life consumption desires.

Since there is no research that has examined consumption desires in the real and the virtual world simultaneously, a qualitative approach seemed appropriate as a first step to explore the topic. Specifically, at this stage of the project, our objective is to conduct 25 individual

interviews with residents within the virtual world Second Life. To date, ten preliminary individual interviews were conducted. A qualitative approach is adopted since it gives the opportunity to delve deeply in the experiences of consumers and allows assessing the subtle links between consumption desires in real and virtual worlds. Given the purpose of this research, the data collection within the virtual world was necessary. Virtual worlds are currently considered as an emerging research field (Williams, 2007; El Kamel, 2009). Indeed, in virtual worlds, avatars move in a 3D graphical environment and can speak and act through their appearance, speech, texts (chats and instant messages) and gestures. The avatar presence have the advantage of a combination of text and graphics that generates: (1) a different dynamic to conduct research and (2) a pseudo-graphic presence that enhances interactivity between subjects and the researcher thus reducing the disadvantages of the physical absence in traditional online research and the loss of paralinguistic elements as gesture expressions, body and face (El Kamel and Rigaux-Bricmont, 2009).

In this research, two main themes are covered: (1) consumption desires in Second Life and the extent to which this virtual world is considered as an alternative to satiate real consumption desires; (2) experiences of consumption desires in the real world, the nature of those desires, and their importance in everyday life. Participation was done on voluntary basis. The participants were French-speaking adults. The avatars were approached and asked whether they want to take part in the study. The table below presents the profiles of the interviewed subjects.

Code	Resident age	Creation date	Resident gender	Avatar gender	Occupation	RP
Avat 1	41	10/24/2008	Male	male	Computer engineer	Yes
Avat 2	42	4/17/2007	Female	female	Accounts Secretary	Yes
Avat 3	51	6/16/2007	Female	female	University teacher	No
Avat 4	24	4/25/2009	Male	male	Computer	Yes
Avat 5	42	5/2/2008	Male	female	Forwarding agent	No
Avat 6	28	6/14/2009	Female	female	-	Yes
Avat 7	50	3/9/2007	Male	male	Senior executive	No
Avat 8	56	12/17/2007	Female	female	Administrative Assistant	No
Avat 9	53	3/1/2007	Male	male	Technician laboratory	No
Avat 10	48	6/12/2006	Male	male	Commerce	No

RESULTS

The data analysis is done according to the approach outlined by Spiggle (1994) consisting of categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionality, integration, and iteration. An

advantage of online research in general and virtual worlds' research in particular, is the absence of the step of transcribing the data. The texts of the interviews have been compiled into a single file and analyzed. Particular attention was paid to the use of concrete and precise descriptions by reducing the use of inferences. In addition, the authors conducted a second reading of the text at monthly intervals to ensure internal reliability of interpretation.

In the following two sections, we present the preliminary findings of the ten interviews, conducted to date, by including verbatim in italics to illustrate the main conclusions.

Consumption in virtual worlds: needs or desires?

Before starting the discussion about consumption desires in virtual worlds, we asked respondents about the distinction they made between desires and needs, and to what they associated their consumption experiences in *Second Life*. The respondents clearly associate needs to things (products, experiences) a person has to have, to know, or to live. Desires are considered as envies, ostentatious products, or things a person wishes to have, to know, or to live. As expressed through the verbatim presented below, the majority of the respondents feel that their consumption in *Second Life* corresponds rather to desires or cyber-needs. The source of consumption desires can be the real or the virtual world, however cyber-needs are born and expressed specifically in virtual worlds and are necessary to the evolution of the avatar.

"Consumer desires, without hesitation. Nothing is expensive in Second Life" (Avat5).

"Desires or cyber-needs. There are sudden impulsive purchases and useful purchases" (Avat4).

As mentioned in the literature, consumption of virtual products is a significant component of Second Life (Castronova 2005, Lin 2007, Kaplan and Haenlein 2009). The desire to acquire and to possess is obvious (Landay 2008) and the virtual objects are a means to display status, a sense of belonging, or one's individuality (Martin 2008).

The data analysis also shows that the *Second Life* residents come to satisfy consumption desires they consider unattainable in real life, as explicated by two avatars:

"... (Second Life is) A way to achieve what we cannot do in Real Life. A way to show what is hidden, one's personality, but also one's talent..." (Avat9).

"I think we come here (to Second Life) to do what we lack in Real Life" (Avat3).

Being a resident of Second Life is a privileged way to socialize, to meet people from different horizons, and to participate to a range of activities. Describing their recurrent activities and experiences on this metaverse, the respondents expressed mainly three types of desires:

- Consumption desires: represent virtual «material» objects such as houses, furniture, cars, clothing, accessories, etc.
- Fantasy desires: flying, teleporting, staying forever young, etc.
- Shameful desires (socially reprehensible desires): infidelity, atypical sexual experiences, etc.

At this stage of the data collection, we identified these three preliminary categories. We expect that additional data will allow us doing a more thorough understanding of the different types of desires, and to propose a more elaborate typology.

How consumption desires are experienced in virtual worlds?

The most important aspect characterizing the experience of consumption desires in *Second Life* is the ease of access to purchase virtual objects. The key motivation for purchases made by the interviewed residents is the affordability of these purchases. Residents are able to buy items they cannot afford their equivalent in real life.

"I'm happy because I found a place where to live my dreams at a low cost" (Avat2).

"The consumption desires are so much easier to meet here that without hesitation we are fully devoted to act wholeheartedly in relation to the real life" (Avat6).

The satisfaction of several consumption desires allows the avatar to integrate the virtual world itself, and to establish himself as a resident. Generally, expenditures decrease with the experience because the resident learns how to target his purchases, or how to create or transform virtual objects. It's worth noting that in Second Life, as in the real world, the display of one's status is linked to ostentatious consumption (Martin 2008). The symbolic value of the objects is important, and products that necessitate more effort and creativity are the most desirable and the most expensive (Martin 2008). In addition, we noticed that Second Life products and brands are more popular and valued than real brands. Generally, major purchases made by residents of Second Life are of three kinds:

- For the appearance of the avatar: skins, shapes, animations;
- For his everyday life: home, furniture, cars, clothing, shoes, etc...
- For his business or hobbies.

However, the virtual consumption desires satiation procures pleasure to the avatar but not enough satisfaction in the sense that it doesn't decrease the intensity of the same desire in real life. This can be explained through the abstract character of possessions in virtual worlds.

It is interesting to note that, just as in real life, consumption desires in the virtual world *Second Life* are mimetic. Several researches on desires (Girard, 1977; Belk and al. 2003, Boujbel 2007) outlined the fact that consumers generally praise objects, products, brands or experiences other consumers have or live. The residents in Second Life behave in the same way as in real life. The avatars desire products, brands and experiences that other avatars have or experience.

We noticed that there is a great influence of how the residents see their relationship to the virtual on the nature of their experiences and the satisfaction of their consumption desires. As mentioned by Catronova (2005), some residents consider Second Life as a play or hobby while others apprehend it as an extension of their real lives. The following verbatim illustrates how Second Life can overflow real life:

"I grew up in Real Life with my adventures as an avatar... I invest everything in Second Life. Real Life ... I sleep, I survive, I pay my bills" (Avat2).

It was interesting to investigate whether the satisfaction of consumption desires via a virtual world enhances or is detrimental to the subjective well-being of the participants. Data analysis shows that the impact may be positive but also negative and that the borderline between the two remains very thin.

"My life in Second Life is ... a drug. It allows me not to not flipping out in front of my frustration" (Avat2).

"A little of both. Well-being for the relaxing and evasive side. Harm, for the time that I can spend sometimes" (Avat5).

CONCLUSION

This study constitutes the first step of a research project dealing with consumption desires in real and virtual worlds. Other data collection will be considered through the content analysis of blogs about consumption in virtual worlds and focus groups in the virtual world Second Life. Nevertheless, at this step, this study allows the achievement of contributions at three levels. At

the conceptual level, this research is a first attempt to explore the relationship between consumption desires in the real and the virtual world. It helps understanding how consumers consider alternative ways to satiate consumption desires out of their reach in the real life, and to what extent, the virtual world offers such satisfaction. At the methodological level, this research involves new data collection methods that will permit to advance knowledge in this field. Finally, at the managerial level, companies choosing to integrate virtual worlds by placing their brands need a useful framework to illuminate their decisions in the light of consumption desires and we expect that results will enlighten these companies in their placement strategies.

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